

Listening Journals for Extensive and Intensive Listening Practice

As a language learner, I have found that one of the most difficult skills to contend with is listening. I was never taught how to listen. It was simply assumed that listening skills would be naturally acquired. For my first few years as an English as a foreign language teacher, I assumed the same. However, as I reflected on my own language-learning experiences and those of my students, I rethought this assumption. I did more research on listening instruction, and, not surprisingly, I learned that listening in a second language is not something that is just picked up.

Instead, the research points to it as a demanding cognitive task that requires a breadth and depth of exposure that neither I nor my students had been given. Through the research, I also realized that my language teachers and I were not the only ones who had made some poor assumptions.

It seems that throughout the history of English language teaching (ELT), most students have never been taught how to listen. According to Thorn (2009), most listening is done for non-listening purposes, such as introducing grammar or vocabulary, for discussion, for testing comprehension (but not actually to learn how to comprehend), and for familiarity with different accents. Rarely will someone claim to use listening in class “to train students to listen more effectively” (Thorn 2009, 9). According to Brown (2011, 36), “playing audio and asking comprehension questions, or even playing audio and asking students to complete tasks, is merely testing.” Therefore, a great deal of listening practice focuses on testing listening, not

teaching it. Testing a skill without first teaching it would not be acceptable for reading, writing, or speaking, and therefore it should not be acceptable for listening.

When listening instruction does occur, it is mostly a top-down approach. Thorn (2009) again points out that the focus is on schema building, gist, and guessing, not the words and sounds that actually make listening challenging. Furthermore, the listening texts themselves often pose a problem—Thorn (2009) believes that most texts are uninteresting from the students’ perspective, lack natural language features (e.g., linking or elision), and utilize one standard accent. None of this prepares students very well for the real-world listening challenges they will encounter.

While these methods of listening instruction still remain the dominant paradigm in ELT, they are slowly changing. Based on my experience as a language learner, on second-language listening research, and on some

newer trends in listening instruction, I have designed a method that uses listening journals to deal with the challenges of learning to listen in a second language. This article introduces the concept of listening journals and explains how teachers can use them to focus on both the extensive and intensive aspects of listening in order to help students improve their overall listening skills.

BRIEF RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Clearly, students need a more focused approach to listening instruction. Recent research from an array of areas indicates that top-down approaches (activating prior knowledge), bottom-up approaches (decoding sounds), and metacognitive approaches (predicting, monitoring, and planning) are all essential for students to become good listeners (see Brown 2011 for an overview). While current listening instruction generally focuses on top-down approaches, bottom-up processing skills are increasingly recognized as important. The lack of phonological awareness and the inability to decode sounds or draw word boundaries are seen as major hindrances to listening (Kiany and Shiramiry 2002; Field 2003, 2008; Wilson 2003), and a shift from top-down to bottom-up listening instruction is supported by a number of research studies (Wilson 2003; Thorn 2009; Renandya and Farrell 2011).

Decoding skills are one piece of the puzzle. Just as learning to read well requires one to do a great deal of reading, learning to listen well requires one to do a great deal of listening. Inspired by extensive reading, an extensive approach to listening has been gaining support in ELT. Proponents suggest that students should listen to a great amount and variety of enjoyable texts at appropriate levels to build listening-comprehension skills (Renandya and Farrell 2011; Chang and

Millett 2014). While the listening sources do not need to be authentic to be effective, some research indicates the positive effect of using authentic materials in terms of their motivating qualities and success at improving listening (Mousavi and Iravani 2012; Thorn 2009). Authentic sources such as videos can be made more accessible to learners through the use of subtitles and captioning, which also have a positive effect on listening (Woodall 2010; Chang and Millett 2014).

LISTENING JOURNALS

The research suggests a clear and desired need for a stronger intensive and extensive approach to listening instruction. Not only do students need to do more listening, but they need to do this listening in conjunction with an approach that helps them focus on sounds, words, and building meaning from the bottom up as well as the top down. Listening journals are one tool I have used to serve these needs.

A listening journal is a book in which students record their extensive and intensive listening practices, as well as reflections on their listening experiences. The extensive listening aspect of listening journals requires students to choose and listen to texts that appeal to them from a source provided by the teacher. Students typically listen to a text several times while focusing on meaning. It is recommended that the selected texts have subtitles or transcripts for follow-up intensive activities. These texts are often authentic media from websites like ted.com, although for lower levels there are many options for media made specifically for language learners, such as NewsInLevels.com and FluentU.com (see www.anthonyschool.com/listening-resources for a full list of sources). For students without access to computer technology, sources may include the teacher or guest speakers from the community.

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Moving from extensive listening to intensive practice, students take these texts and focus on decoding or other related skills in order to train their listening abilities. Popular and effective activities in this area include completing gap fills and transcriptions; however, prosody marking and pronunciation activities are also useful. Finally, students reflect on their successes, strengths, and weaknesses in order to identify skills they need to improve. Strengthening these weaker skills becomes a goal for students to focus on during further listening practice in the classroom, outside the classroom, or in subsequent listening journals.

All these activities are recorded in the listening journal and submitted once a week. For example, a website and series of activities are introduced and demonstrated on Monday; students choose a video from that website and complete the template, and then the students' work is collected the following Monday. Each week, the source and activity can remain the same or be changed. Listening journals can be handwritten in a notebook or follow a premade template. Templates can be tailored for specific activities, or they can be general templates suitable for any activity (see the Appendixes for examples). Another way to use listening journals is to provide a small book, or packet, of journal templates at the beginning of the course, along with a number of websites appropriate for the students' level, and providing a quick demonstration of each site and activity. Students visit any of the sites each week and select and listen to a video of their choice. For any video, they should follow the same activities, which include meaning-based listening followed by intensive listening activities. Students complete these journals on their own time and submit their book or packet several times throughout the course (an example of

this can be found at www.anthonyteacher.com/blog/listening-journals-redux). Depending on the number of students, the goals of the course, and the assessed weight of listening journals, the journals also can be collected daily, semi-weekly, or monthly. They can be assessed on any number of criteria, including completeness, correctness, effort, and quality.

WEB-BASED LISTENING JOURNAL ACTIVITIES

Following are examples of activities that can be conducted in conjunction with keeping a listening journal. The goals of the first two listening journal activities for upper-intermediate to advanced students are to focus on main ideas and on details, practice note-taking skills, and build decoding skills. The listening source is a TED Talk from www.ted.com, and students are instructed to find a video that can provide subtitles and transcripts both in English and their native language. First, I outline these two listening journal activities for upper-intermediate to advanced students, as well as the rationale for the activities. Following the TED Talk activities, I outline a listening journal activity and rationale for intermediate students from www.esl-lab.com.

Web-based activities for upper-intermediate to advanced students

Overview: Watch a short lecture, take notes, complete a gap fill, and use subtitles to find gaps in your listening and listening-comprehension skills.

Requirements: Write video title, video summary, and reflections in the listening journal (see Appendix 1 for template example), take notes in the listening journal, and print the gap fill.

Goal 1: (your personal listening goal)

Goal 2: listening for the main ideas and specific details

Goal 3: understanding specific words

Listening journals can be handwritten in a notebook or follow a premade template.

ACCESSING THE TED TALK LISTENING SOURCE

Go to www.ted.com and find an interesting video by clicking the “Watch” or “Discover” tabs or by using the “Search” function. After pressing the play button, you will see a small “Subtitles” icon below the video on the right. Make sure the selected video has subtitles in English *and* your first language by clicking the icon. *Note:* I recommend the video by Carol Dweck, *The Power of Believing That You Can Improve*, which discusses “the idea that we can grow our brain’s capacity to learn and to solve problems.” Subtitles are available in Chinese, Korean, Spanish, and many other languages. However, your students may choose any video!

TED TALK ACTIVITY 1

1. You will need three pens, each of a different color (e.g., black, blue, and red).
 2. First, watch the TED Talk video *without* subtitles. Do not pause the video. Take notes in the Notes section.
 3. Second, watch the video with English subtitles. Do not pause the video. Add more information to your notes using a pen with a different color ink.
 4. Finally, watch the video using subtitles in your first language. Add more information to your notes using a pen with a different color.
 5. Look over your notes and add questions and key words to the Notes section.
 6. Answer the Activity 1 Reflection Questions and then go to Activity 2.
- interesting vocabulary. Record these words and phrases in the Vocabulary section of your journal.
3. Choose a section of the transcript that is one to two minutes long and copy the text.
 4. Go to the cloze test creator at <http://l.georges.online.fr/tools/cloze.html>.
 5. Paste your text in the yellow box and select “Interactive” and “No clues” below the yellow box.
 6. On the right side of the website, choose how many words should be removed. Replace “n” with a number. For example, if you choose “5,” the website will delete every fifth word. If you choose a small number, you will have many missing words. If you choose a large number, you will have only a few missing words. If you leave “n,” the number and pattern of missing words will be random. I recommend choosing a small number or just leaving “n.”
 7. Click on “Submit.”
 8. You now have an interactive gap fill.
 9. Listen to the TED Talk video again in English and complete the gap fill. Do not look at the clues!
 10. Do Step 9 at least twice. Write down your score each time.
 11. Print your gap fill and submit it with your journal.
 12. Answer the Activity 2 Reflection Questions.

TED TALK ACTIVITY 2

1. After pressing the play button, you will see a small “Transcript” icon below the video on the right. Click on the icon and make sure the transcript is in English.
2. Read through the transcript for new and

Table 1 presents the rationale for the main steps of the upper-intermediate to advanced TED Talk activities.

Web-based activity for intermediate students

Following is a web-based activity for intermediate students to complete outside class. The goals of this listening journal activity

are to focus on overall meaning, build decoding skills, and practice error analysis. The listening source of this activity is www.esl-lab.com, and students are instructed to find a video with a corresponding gap-fill activity called “Text Completion Quiz.” Table 2 outlines the activity and gives the rationale for each step. (See Appendix 2 for a listening journal template that can be used for this activity.)

ADAPTING LISTENING JOURNAL TASKS FOR NON-WEB-BASED ACTIVITIES

There are many ways to adapt listening journal tasks for almost any context, and having access to the Internet is not required. Students can keep listening journals with any source of live or prerecorded listening. They could listen to the teacher read a book aloud, listen to the teacher tell a story, or even listen to guest speakers from the community. As illustrated in Table 3, in these types of activities students can focus on note-taking, dictation and dictogloss activities,

transcription, or even creating their own gap fills for other students to fill in.

Listening journals can also be used as a vocabulary development tool. For example, students can find new words in their listening texts and bring this vocabulary back to the classroom to be pooled, discussed, and exploited by the teacher. After students gain a deeper understanding of the vocabulary, they re-listen to their texts with a greater capacity for understanding. Doing this also increases the number of exposures students have to vocabulary, which is essential for vocabulary learning.

Pronunciation can also be practiced when students add activities that focus on mimicry or comparison. For instance, students can choose short (10 to 20 seconds) clips from their text. They then listen and repeat these clips carefully, aiming to copy the sounds and tone of the original speaker. This is great fun for both the students and the teacher. If the

Activity	Rationale
1. Students choose an interesting video from ted.com.	The effectiveness of extensive listening comes from students’ ability to listen to interesting topics for pleasure at levels they deem appropriate.
2. Students watch the video without subtitles and take notes.	This mimics the experiences of a university classroom and gives students practice on taking notes and focusing on main ideas.
3. Students watch the video with English subtitles and add to their notes using a different-colored pen.	This gives students more linguistic support while allowing them to monitor their comprehension and focus on details.
4. Students watch the video with subtitles in their native language and take notes using a different-colored pen.	This gives students the ability to evaluate their understanding and compare their L1 and L2 abilities.
5. Students choose a one- to two-minute section of the transcript and create a gap fill using the cloze test creator. Students complete the gap fill twice or until they get a satisfactory score.	This activity focuses attention on decoding and trains students to listen carefully. Using the cloze test creator website, students can randomly remove words or remove specific words such as verbs or prepositions.
6. Students answer the reflection questions in their journal (see Appendix 1 for template example).	This helps students notice and think about their strengths and weaknesses in both comprehension and specific listening.

Table 1. TED Talk activity for upper-intermediate to advanced students

technology is available, students can record themselves and then listen to both the original and the recording to compare and contrast their pronunciation. Furthermore, they can explore different English-language accents using the listening journals (Galloway and Rose 2014). Students then complete their reflections in their L1, making it perhaps more useful and more diary-like, especially at lower proficiency levels. Teachers ask students to share and discuss their listening texts in class, which is an interesting activity and gets students involved. These are only a few of the ways to adapt listening journals and maintain important elements of extensive and intensive listening.

CONCLUSION

The listening journal projects outlined above have been developed and refined since 2012, and I have used them with hundreds of students from various language backgrounds and proficiencies. Almost every student has found the listening journal to be not only interesting

and useful for listening practice, but a source of improvement for their real-world listening skills. While this claim needs to be empirically tested, it is easy to see the effectiveness of a listening project that focuses on the gaps and needs highlighted by previous research.

The idea for listening journals derived from the need for a different approach to listening that considers the realities that make listening so difficult. As the research shows, without exposure to a great deal of listening input and lacking specific attention to the sounds, words, and phrases that comprise this input, a student's listening skills cannot grow efficiently and effectively. If the dominant paradigm of listening instruction in ELT is one based on testing listening rather than learning how to listen, we are doing our students a major disservice. Once we shift our focus away from this type of listening instruction, not only will the assumption that students automatically pick up listening skills no longer guide ELT, but the claim that listening is the most difficult skill may be a thing of the past.

Activity	Rationale
1. Students choose an interesting, level-appropriate listening text from www.esl-lab.com/quizzes.htm .	This activity can be completed outside class for homework or in the student's free time. This website offers numerous interesting graded texts from which students can choose.
2. Students listen to their chosen text and either take notes or write a summary after listening. Students check their comprehension by completing the provided comprehension quiz and noting their scores.	The focus is on overall meaning. Students should listen as many times as necessary to get the overall meaning.
3. Students choose and complete the "Text Completion Quiz" activity. If no gap-fill activity is provided, students or the teacher can easily make one. Students include their score in their journals.	This gives students an opportunity to practice intensive listening skills.
4. As a final or alternative activity, students choose a difficult section of the listening text and transcribe it in their journals. They then check their transcription against the original and make any corrections necessary.	This gives students further practice in intensive listening and decoding. Following advice from Wilson (2003), students look at their transcription corrections and attempt to analyze what caused gaps or mishearings, then attempt to resolve issues by focusing on these areas in future work.

Table 2. Web-based activity for intermediate students

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Activity	Rationale
1. Students select a story for the teacher to read. Students prepare their journals with the story's title.	While class-based activities do not usually lend themselves to the extensive aspect of listening, for areas that lack resources they can still be a great source of listening. Having students choose the text boosts motivation.
2. The teacher reads the story while students listen. In their journals, students may draw a picture of the character(s) or events.	This activity allows students to focus on the overall meaning of the story without worrying about specific words or details.
3. After reading and discussing the meaning of the story with the class, the teacher distributes a copy of one page of the story with words missing. The teacher reads the story again while the students fill in the blanks. Alternative activities could include doing a dictogloss of the story while the teacher is reading, or working in groups to transcribe the story as another classmate reads it.	The teacher can remove words that are unstressed, blend, or are otherwise difficult for students to hear. In this way, students practice their decoding skills, an essential element of intensive listening.
4. Students check answers and highlight any incorrect choices or difficult words.	This gives the teacher an opportunity to pinpoint specific listening issues and discuss interesting pronunciation points.

Table 3. Non-web-based activity for intermediate and below students

APPENDIX 1

Listening Journal Template for TED Talk Activities

Date:	Information
Video title: Write the title of the video and the name of the speaker.	
Video summary: Write a one-sentence summary of the video.	
Reflection on achievement of goals: 1. Personal listening goal 2. Listening for the main ideas and specific details 3. Understanding specific words	1. 2. 3.
Vocabulary: Write new and interesting words and phrases.	
Notes:	

QUESTIONS

Activity 1 questions:

1. Compare your no-subtitle notes to your English subtitle notes.
 - a. What percentage did you understand without subtitles?
 - b. What information did you get when you listened without subtitles? What kind of information did you miss?
 - c. Why do you think you missed this information?
2. Compare your English subtitle notes to your native-language subtitle notes.
 - a. Did you miss or misunderstand any major or important ideas? Did you miss any minor details or specific examples?
 - b. Why do you think you missed or misunderstood this information?

Activity 2 questions:

- Gap-Fill Score 1:
 - Gap-Fill Score 2:
1. How well did you do?
 2. What was easy to hear and understand?
 3. What was difficult to hear and understand?

Overall Reflection:

1. After completing Activities 1 and 2, what skills have already improved or are already strong?
2. What listening skills do you need to improve further? (*Make this the goal of your next listening journal.*)

APPENDIX 2

General Listening Journal Template

Website	Audio Name	Level/Other Information

Summary: What was the listening selection about?

Vocabulary: What words did you learn?

1.
2.
3.
4.

Activities: What did you do? What scores did you get?

Self-Assessment

Question	Yes	No	Maybe
The speed was OK.			
The vocabulary was OK.			
The pronunciation was OK.			
This helped my listening skills.			
I think my listening skills are improving.			
I need to improve (please circle all that apply): listening to main ideas / listening to details / listening to numbers / listening to fast speech / listening to connected speech / listening for a long time / listening to other accents / my vocabulary / my pronunciation			